

New Tasks for Traditional and New Actors in Contemporary Russia

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Events of the last decade in Russia have demonstrated the increasing role of society as a whole on the conduct of policy. Although the most reliable and effective instruments of domestic and foreign policy are in the hands of a small political elite, we are witnessing the emergence and strengthening of new actors that aim to influence socioeconomic and political processes, especially at the local level. The gap between elite views and those of the rest of society is shrinking, in part because of these actors. Russia's central and regional governments recognize that community-based nongovernmental organizations and new actors have a significant role to play in the country's transition to a functioning civil society. The members of the Public Chamber, created by President Vladimir Putin, include many representatives of these new actors.

Last year was dominated by the tragic events in Beslan, North Ossetia, where in September 2004 a group of terrorists captured a school, taking more than 1,300 people hostage. This act has had a profound impact on the development of sociopolitical activity of Russian citizens and movements not only in the North Caucasus, but throughout Russia. The NGO "Mothers of Beslan" has become well-known in Russia through its activism during the investigation and court proceedings that followed the Beslan events.

On the one hand, we are witnessing the concentration of power in the hands of the president. On the other, election rules at the local level and the creation of the Public Chamber at the federal level have created a new environment for parties, NGOs, mass media, and individuals. Are they ready for a new role? What resources do they have to take a more active role in Russian political life?

It is true that NGOs in Russia are not very influential and are less effective than in the West. Still, new actors with more noticeable influence are emerging; these include social movements, internet-based structures, mass media, and individuals. For example, the Internet site Live Journal has united energetic and motivated individuals interested in discussing and being involved in various socioeconomic, cultural, and political issues. Spontaneously organized meetings have resulted from these discussions, with several such meetings taking place in Moscow last spring.

Ethnic-based organizations and churches play a special role, given their participation in socially important events in Russia. Many ethnic-based associations receive financial and administrative support from local authorities. However, international organizations and foundations have been key sources of support for the emergence of the many NGOs in Russia. Support for NGOs and civil society is viewed by many in the West as an alternative approach to building democracy in Russia. Officials in Russia often accuse NGOs, such as the Committee of Soldier's Mothers, of serving foreign interests and even of subversive activity.

Russian NGOs are being developed by local and community citizen groups to meet needs not addressed by national and regional governments. The Declaration on Strategic Security issued by the U.S. government for the May 2002 Moscow summit included an official statement directly related to the importance of NGOs. It stated:

Batling the scourge of HIV/AIDS and other deadly diseases, ending family violence, protecting the environment, and defending the rights of women are areas where U.S. and Russian institutes, and especially NGOs, can successfully expand their cooperation.

In reality, the image of such NGOs in Russia is not very positive. They are often viewed as parasitical based on achieving only one project, sponsored by foreign foundations or organizations, and lacking a strategic vision and mission. There are few qualified and motivated managers of such organizations, and attempts to improve the work of these NGOs through initiatives such as alumni programs have not been very effective. Very rarely does one see joint participation by NGOs in socially and politically significant events. For example, there are 35 ethnic organizations and associations in Nizhni Novgorod. Some duplicate each other, leaders do not craft agreements among themselves, and they sometimes cannot serve as reliable partners that truly represent ethnic

communities. As a consequence, such organizations become discredited among ordinary citizens and local authorities.

A more effective way for foreign sponsors to stimulate civil society may be to concentrate on supporting individuals and, especially, youth. Many young Russians return and work successfully in Russian cities and regions after training and studying abroad, and most of them need financial support.

The image of NGOs might be improved if they found alternative sources of financial support. Businesses might be more interested in supporting flexible and more effective networks and remarkable individuals. For example, Vladimir Potanin has created stipends for students, young scholars, and scientists. The program started five years ago and is popular among students and university officials. Increasingly, business is financing new actors, and this is an important trend.

At the same time, the role of NGOs and associations may become more influential due to new political conditions. In March 2005, the Russian State Duma authorized the creation of the Public Chamber. Some experts argue that it will be a shadow parliament empowered to propose constitutional changes. Even if that is not the case, the Public Chamber may enable NGOs and other organizations to take independent positions on key domestic and foreign policies.

Another realm for NGO activity in Russia is foreign policy expertise. Foreign policy expertise in today's Russia is highly personalized: there are many bright, well-educated, and trained experts who comment on television and radio programs. However, Russia has few institutions or organizations that represent not only the position of its leader, but also a set of principles and ideas. Think tanks in Russia do not have a real and persistent influence on the process of foreign policy decisionmaking.

Russian institutes should strive to connect intellectual and political elites with civil society institutions, as well as other organizations and groups. The most important functions of institutes should be to articulate interests, to make them known among decisionmakers, and to mobilize public opinion in support of attractive ideas. This is not always done adequately in Russia. Independent financial resources for institutes would help create an established role. The most active and influential institutes that existed in the 1990s no longer exist today. This will remain true as long as such institutes consist of merely a director or president, an answering machine, and a bank account.

Furthermore, foreign policy expertise in Russia is limited geographically. Historically, all major institutions were located in Moscow (such as the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, the Institute of Oriental Studies, the Institute of Europe, and the Institute of the United States and Canada). During the 1990s, new centers were

founded (such as the Moscow Carnegie Center and the PIR-Center), also in Moscow. Financially, institutionally, and sometimes intellectually, regions in Russia are unprepared to provide foreign policy expertise. This does not imply that those regional institutions that do exist should not be supported. Russian policy research institutes and foundations should broadly involve people in policy discussions and provide genuine communication between state authorities and society. This would stimulate public interest in actual socioeconomic and political issues and more effectively build expertise and information.

In order to create effective civil society institutions, Russia needs a new, more pragmatic, and open-minded generation. Even more importantly, Russia needs local philanthropists. This takes time, but it would be wise to recognize that local philanthropy will emerge.

What are the most important tasks for NGOs and new actors in contemporary Russia?

- Building civil society through citizen participation in the program planning process (beginning on the local level);
- Creating the conditions for citizens, government, and the private sector to develop joint partnerships;
- Establishing better knowledge and understanding of socioeconomic, cultural, and political issues confronting change;
- Creating flexible, interactive, and networked interactions, while paying less attention to traditional structures and formalized means and instruments of activity.

Another important task for scholars and donors is to teach citizens (especially students) how to organize and work in such organizations. Unfortunately, very few institutions and universities in Russia offer special programs and courses that teach effective and efficient techniques for designing, developing, managing, and assessing NGO results. Russia must invest in education that can further open up new and exciting career opportunities for young people. This would be a better contribution to reform and social stability. The most difficult task is the inclusion of new actors to work in harmony and partnership with government, private sectors, and communities.